

Next generation of redevelopers has designs on downtown

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New Brunswick turned a corner 25 years ago when Johnson & Johnson executives hired architect I.M. Pei to design a new world headquarters for the company and a new downtown to match.

Pei envisioned an arts district with theaters, a larger medical campus with more hospital and academic buildings, and a grand hotel next to a new Johnson & Johnson office tower.

All arrived, transforming the blighted downtown.

Now a new generation of redevelopers is in control of New Brunswick, and they have created their own vision for a downtown transformation.

To play the role of Pei, city officials hired Marilyn Taylor, the urban planner who is chairwoman of the world-renowned New York architecture firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill.

Taylor, who helped create EuroDisney, the New Jersey Center for the Performing Arts and Canary Wharf in London, let loose her imagination on the downtown and created CORE Vision, a design plan named for its commercial, office, retail and entertainment components.

She drew up a grand plaza to replace New Brunswick's NJ Transit station, connecting it to the city's three theaters by a new boulevard and a public park. She recommends letting the health care institutions expand into four drab blocks next to city and county government buildings and trying to lure a Fortune 100 biotechnology headquarters to the mix.

To rival Pei's 15-story Johnson & Johnson tower, she sees a new "identity building" for the city -- an office tower just up the street from J&J, where a modest mall and parking deck now stand, that could offer big-name retailers and entertainment on the lower floors and soar 30 stories or more.

"I see it as almost Times Squarish," said Christopher Paladino, president of the New Brunswick Development Corporation, the private nonprofit development agency that hired Taylor. "Maybe a big Old Navy, maybe a Virgin Records, maybe an ESPN Zone -- a destination for the region."

Redevelopment has never really stopped in New Brunswick. In recent years there has been a flurry of growth among the downtown medical institutions on Somerset Street -- including Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey and the Cancer Institute of New Jersey.

Several upscale residential complexes also are being built or planned downtown, which officials hope will add life to the city on nights and weekends and reinvigorate the lackluster retail sector.

Through CORE Vision, Taylor sought to unify these trends and make sure they continue according to a deliberate plan. Her plan, for example, would brighten up the streets between the new apartment complexes and the medical campus so young professionals could walk to work.

CORE Vision is the first plan of its scope and scale for New Brunswick since the initial wave of redevelopment in the mid-1970s. The development corporation, referred to as Devco, has spent close to \$100,000 on the plan so far, Paladino said.

Now the question is how much of it will materialize. Before anything gets built, funds would have to be found, redevelopment agreements would have to be signed and property would have to be condemned.

As the first redevelopment gathered steam, then-Mayor and later state Sen. John Lynch deftly ushered Pei's ideas through the city bureaucracy. This time Mayor James Cahill, Lynch's protégé and successor, is trying to follow suit.

Cahill, running for his fourth term in November, has launched a campaign to win public support for CORE Vision, with a series of public discussions on the plan.

"What we thought was it was time to step back and take a look at where we want to go in the next 10 years," Cahill told an audience of about 100 people who recently showed up to a Rutgers University auditorium to hear him and Taylor present CORE Vision.

The audience was sprinkled with city employees and other supporters, but dominated by skeptics. Among the naysayers were business owners who are in the path of the proposed buildings, working-class residents who feel they have never benefited from downtown redevelopment and activists who oppose the Democratic machine politics of the city, including Keith Thomas, an opponent of Cahill in the mayoral race.

Cahill responded to such criticisms by pointing to several projects currently under construction in low-income areas of town.

Last year the city succeeded in razing the New Brunswick Memorial Homes, a four-building, high-rise public housing project that was allowed to deteriorate in recent decades. It is being replaced with Hope Manor, a 68-unit mixed-income townhouse and apartment complex currently under construction, and Riverside, 76 similar units.

Also, Devco is putting the finishing touches on the new K-8 Lord Stirling Community School.

The most dynamic redevelopment action is, as it always has been, downtown.

The medical institutions have been growing fast and shown no signs of slowing down. Robert Wood Johnson completed the 70-bed Bristol-Myers Squibb Children's Hospital in 2000. In the fall, UMDNJ will begin construction on the Children's Health Institute, a research facility. The Cancer Institute is currently building a 150,000-square-foot addition.

Taylor's plan leaves space for them to continue to grow. A new Robert Wood Johnson office building is envisioned next to the government buildings. A new UMDNJ building is sketched in next to it. The heads of the institutions met with Cahill and Paladino as CORE Vision was drafted, and both want to continue expanding.

Alongside those sites is a block the planners would like filled by something the city has too few of -- taxpayers. Officials hope to draw a major biotechnology or pharmaceutical firm, with expensive laboratories that make for a healthy tax assessment. More than 50 percent of New Brunswick's property is owned by nonprofit institutions, which are tax-exempt.

"A lot of these firms want to locate in the type of environment we have here," said Glenn Patterson, the city's economic development director. "They want a place where they can have access to a smart, young

talent pool of medical students, and develop research partnerships with Rutgers or the health care institutions."

Rutgers, the city's largest institution, is also continuing to grow. Devco is building new offices for the university's John J. Heldrich Workforce Development Center, an academic institute for work research and policy, in a massive downtown complex that will also include 250 hotel rooms and 10,000 square feet of retail space.

Plans are also in the pipeline for a new Rutgers public-safety building near Douglass College and a 200-unit dormitory downtown.

All told, it makes for the start of a new chapter in the city's redevelopment, said John J. Heldrich, the namesake of the Heldrich Center. A retired Johnson & Johnson executive, Heldrich was as responsible as anyone for the start of the redevelopment in the 1970s.

Heldrich, 76, said he, Lynch and the other early redevelopment gurus are still involved behind the scenes, giving critiques and accolades as warranted. But he left no doubt the baton had been passed.

"We have a very solid class of young revivalists, I would call them," Heldrich said in the office he still keeps at Johnson & Johnson. "I'm very bullish on this new generation."